

Out Of The Woodwork

by Madelene Rich

In this article I will relate how Vision Australia's woodworking group for vision impaired people propelled our son on a path to furniture making.

From a young age, Sean had shown an interest in carpentry (Photo.1). This was no real surprise since his dad is a carpenter and his grandfather had had a love of woodwork, making fine furniture items in his retirement.

As a small boy, Sean found great joy in being in the garage exploring and tinkering, asking questions or commenting on this tool or that. He would happily spend hours there feeding his curiosity about how tools worked and what they were used for. He seemed very comfortable in this space, being amongst the shambles of building paraphernalia typically found in a tradesman's garage that is bursting with materials and tools, garnered from many years of working in the trade.

As a four year old he would enthusiastically take charge to wind up his dad's extension cords at the end of a work day. We would marvel at his command of the task displaying the technique of a real tradesman. Expanding his arms outward, stretching the cord to exact lengths each time, before bringing his hands together to form similarly sized circles of cord, then repeating the movement again and again until finishing the job by plugging the cord into itself.

Photo.2: Making a garden bench during his early days at Vision Australia's course at Kensington VIC



Sean was born with CHARGE syndrome, a complex syndrome of multisensory impairments including vision and hearing impairments (deafblind). He has bilateral colobomas and his vision is 6/60 rendering him legally blind. He has bilateral moderate to severe hearing loss and has a bone anchored hearing aid which gives him a good level of hearing.

He has an unsafe swallow, making it difficult for him to take food orally and has been tube fed since three months of age. He also has a facial palsy which makes it difficult for him to speak clearly and he has challenges with balance, strength and stamina.

He attended mainstream primary school and high school before moving to a special school to finish his formal education years. It was at the end of his final year of school when we wondered if Sean's love of woodwork could direct him into a career in the trade.

If carpentry was to be a viable future career path for Sean, it was going to take more than an innate ability to make it happen. Much to our disappointment, we found ourselves at the end of his formal schooling with no clear post-school pathway. As we faced the empty year ahead of us, it felt like we were stepping off a cliff into the unknown.

Then I remembered what a parent of another child with CHARGE syndrome had said to me once, "our kids don't stop learning just because they leave school". She was right.

For a variety of reasons, Sean left school without the same level of maturity, independence and experience of others of his age. He still had so much to learn before he would be ready to springboard to the next stage, whether it be a job or further study. It was then that we decided that Sean's first year out of high school would be a year of learning beyond the classroom. We would exploit his passions to unearth opportunities for him to grow physically and mentally. We would help him take risks, explore new challenges, find new skills and meet new people.

Vision Australia's Woodwork Programme teaches woodworking skills to people who are blind or have low vision. Students are taught in a professionally set up workshop, using static woodworking machinery and hand and power tools (Photos.2-4). Group numbers are kept low allowing woodwork teachers Brett Behan and John McLeod to cater to students' individual learning needs. At our initial meeting, Brett told us that while



Photo.1: Sean learning woodworking in primary school

woodworking was a major part of this course, social connection and interaction were important elements, too, and the participants would be encouraged to interact and get to know one another. On listening to this, we knew we had found the right activity to put Sean's first 'year of learning' into action.

Because the workshop was some 60km from our home, it was an opportunity for him to put into practice his orientation and mobility (O&M) skills, learned over many years, but never fully achieved by travelling independently. We set a goal that he would be doing this in six months' time. Initially I accompanied him on the three-hour round-trip to the workshop, taking several trains and buses to get there. Shadowing him, staying a few steps behind or a few seats back, I allowed him to find his way and make his own decisions and mistakes. I watched him use the iPhone app to track his journey and read

Photo.3: Sean with Vision Australia's Woodwork Trainer, Brett Behan



computer screens and audio information at platforms to check for delays or cancellations. He would stand in safety zones or sit in sections of the train or bus specifically for disabled passengers. I watched him cross roads confidently and use his identification cane (ID cane), knowing how much of a difference it made having other passengers aware of his vision impairment.

As the weeks passed by, I slowly allowed the gap between us to grow. Instead of shadowing him, I walked on the opposite footpath, sat in the next carriage, caught the next train, met him at the workshop and then finally allowed him to travel home on his own. By June of that year, he had reached his goal and was travelling independently to and from the workshop.

With an emphasis on the importance of social interaction within the woodwork group, Sean had an opportunity to improve his conversational skills. While speaking is his preferred communication method, speech clarity is impacted somewhat by his facial palsy. Participating in discussions within a group setting can be difficult too as his low vision impacts his ability to recognise faces and facial expressions, and he can miss parts of a conversation, or nuances, because of his hearing impairment.

The workshop itself was light and bright, catering to Sean's vision needs, and the smaller group sizes, along with Brett and John's encouragement, allowed Sean to feel comfortable and confident to interact with others.

At the end of 2019, Sean did something quite out of character that showed us just how much he was enjoying the social aspects of woodwork and the camaraderie of this intergenerational group of woodwork enthusiasts. An end of year breakup BBQ had been planned and I did not think Sean would want to go, considering it was forecast to be a very hot day (he hates hot weather and the long trip on public transport to the workshop would be a big effort for him) and there was no woodwork planned for

the day, just the social BBQ activity. I wondered why he was wanting to travel such a long way, on such a hot day, just for a sausage when he does not eat food at all. And then I realised he was choosing to go to the workshop purely for social reasons, to be with his mates and to wish them well for the break. This group had given him a real sense of community so far from his home.

Within a few short weeks of Sean starting his woodwork training at Vision Australia, Sean showed that he did have a talent for working with wood. Under Brett and John's gentle guidance and skills, Sean learnt how to do basic woodworking techniques such as dowel, mortice and tenon, assembly and finishing while building a range of items such as a chopping board, toolbox and a garden bench.

Being on the tools every week was having a positive impact on his ability. He became more confident in handling the power tools and working on the machinery and it showed in the quality of his work. There was a beautiful jewellery box with dovetail joints, a coffee table and a TV cabinet. By the end of the year, he had competently completed all three levels of the course in just 12 months, instead of the usual 18 months.

It was then that Brett suggested we should enrol Sean in TAFE because he felt he had the potential to go further with his woodwork. The following year, he commenced a six month course in Certificate II in Furniture Making and by June he had successfully completed the course and obtained his Construction Induction Card (White Card).

While Sean enjoyed TAFE, there were challenges for him in the learning environment. He managed well with most tasks and was at the same skill level as his peers, but he found it hard to keep up with the pace of the work, needing more time to complete tasks adequately. The larger group numbers made accessing the tuition challenging as he often needed to seek clarification from the learning assistant on what the tutor had said or to better understand the instruction. He also need-

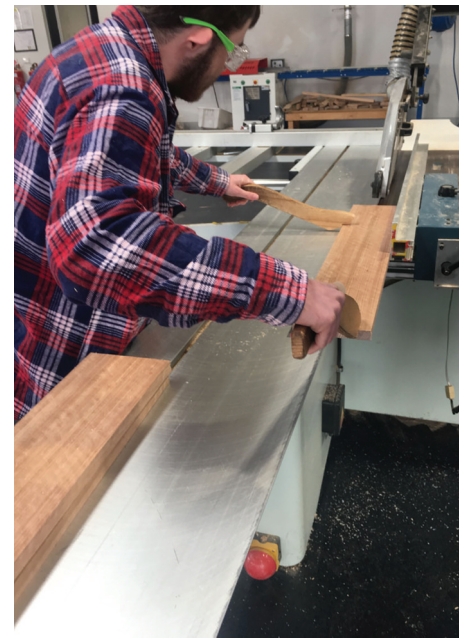


Photo.4: Sean operating the panel saw at the Vision Australia workshop

ed closer guidance than the other students for finer work and finishing. It was not possible for the tutor to provide this level of support because of the large group size and limited time available to all students. Travelling by public transport three days a week was tiring for Sean and took a toll on his energy as he would often experience fatigue during the day.

Having experienced TAFE, we decided that any further training would be best delivered in a way that catered to Sean's individual learning needs and met his goals. He is now receiving weekly 1:1 tuition from a qualified furniture maker so that he can building on his current skills to help him finesse his craft and learn new techniques. With a goal to producing a range of items that he can make and sell, he is also learning about prototyping, costing items and customer service skills. He has visited timber and salvage yards to learn about different types of timbers and timber selection.

Photo.5: Working at home, revarnishing the family dining table



Photo.6: Woodworking with his father, Brian





Photo.7: Having graduated to Vision Australia's Open Access programme, Sean works on his own projects such as this door for a TV cabinet. Through woodworking his posture, stance and strength have greatly improved

With the benefit of his NDIS plan, we have a team of professionals supporting Sean in this activity. A communication guide, skilled in working with people with deafblindness, assists Sean at the work-

shop with his expressive and receptive communication challenges and makes sure he is aware of what is happening around him at all times. The communication guide's participation is strengthening the student-tutor relationship.

Weekly physiotherapy sessions with a focus on building Sean's muscle strength, stamina, balance, posture and fine and gross motor skills are paying off. He is now able to maintain positions, motions and movements while doing his woodwork (Photos.5-7). Weekly pilates lessons strengthen his abdominals, lower back, glutes, hips and pelvic muscles.


The Orientation and Mobility specialist visited the tutor's workshop and deemed only a few adjustments were needed to support Sean's vision needs, such as yellow markings to define clear pathways and edges of the machinery. A speech therapist is working with the communication guide, the tutor and Sean to develop communication strategies to use in the workshop and in the community.

Sean has come a long way in the last two years and his successes and achievements are due greatly to his participation in Vision Australia's Woodwork Programme. He not only gained woodworking techniques that enabled him to transition to further study at TAFE, he also gained valuable life skills that gave him the confidence to take a risk and move forward with this training. Transporting himself to the workshop each week was the catalyst to independent travel and the

safe environment of the smaller group size allowed him to build his skills in social interaction and conversation. Additionally, being among others with similar disabilities to his own was an important element in his overall enjoyment of this programme.

Sean continues to enjoy the Open Access Programme at Vision Australia where he gets to create his own woodwork projects, the first of which was a bookshelf he made to house his late grandfather's treasured woodworking books, bequeathed to Sean by his nanny.

Outside of woodwork, Sean's other passions are caravans, a long love affair that began with the innocent purchase of an edition of Caravan World magazine bought solely to keep him occupied on a long haul flight to Europe in 2011. Since then, he has been a regular subscriber to the magazine, keeping up with the latest trends and technologies. He has attended every Melbourne caravan show since (even attending the Paris Caravan Show in 2019). Such is his love for these mobile homes, he has designed a logo for his woodwork pieces, with his initials in the shape of a caravan.

His biggest goal is to one day buy an older-style van to renovate and use as a games room. Every piece of woodwork that he makes and sells from now on will be branded with the logo, reminding Sean of his objective. 

(For further information, Sean can be contacted c/- madelene44@gmail.com)

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